

Non-Conformist Chapels and Meeting Places in Abbotsbury

Interim Report

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Background

- 1672 The first known record of non-conformist activity in Abbotsbury was in June 1672 when Humphrey Miller was granted a license to use his house as a Congregational meeting place
- 1795 Kelly's Directory of 1920 informs us of a "Congregational Chapel founded 1795 with 250 sittings..." It is unclear whether 'Chapel' relates to a building or simply a body of people. There were probably Methodists also in the village by this time since John Wesley had sent itinerant preachers throughout Dorset and it is unlikely that Abbotsbury would have been overlooked.
- 1798 An entry in the Bridport Congregational Church book dated November 7th 1798 tells us that Messrs. Hart and Gollop were allocated to perform the services at Abbotsbury the following Sunday. There clearly were meetings held somewhere at this time but the location is currently unknown.

The first permanent Meeting Place

- 1799 Further entries in the Bridport Congregational Church book (dated 13th August 1799) tell us that the lease of a house was given by a Mr. Watson of Abbotsbury for five years and that the conversion of this meeting place into a chapel was carried out by Congregational church members from Dorchester and Weymouth with funding (£31.8s.1d) from Bridport, Weymouth and Poole Congregationalists. This building was a house situated behind what is now Strangways Hall and was accessed from Red Lane. The remains of the building are in the gardens of The Old Schoolhouse tea rooms.

The Evangelical Magazine of 1800 (p. 41) mentions that there were three services at the opening on the 13 November 1799 with visiting preachers from Weymouth (Mr Lamb), Bridport (Mr Saltern) and Sydling (Mr Gambole). It also states that "there was a crowded audience and very attentive.... Abbotsbury has been favoured with the gospel for twelve months past..." This suggests that whilst there had been non-conformists in Abbotsbury since the previous century their activities were not necessarily continuous

Following the opening in 1799 it would appear that services continued to be conducted by ministers and lay preachers from Bridport, Dorchester and Weymouth and then, when the Weymouth Itinerant Society was formed in April 1846, they continued the role albeit Upwey church ministers held overall responsibility for Abbotsbury.



The old Congregational and Methodist meeting place/chapel, date unknown

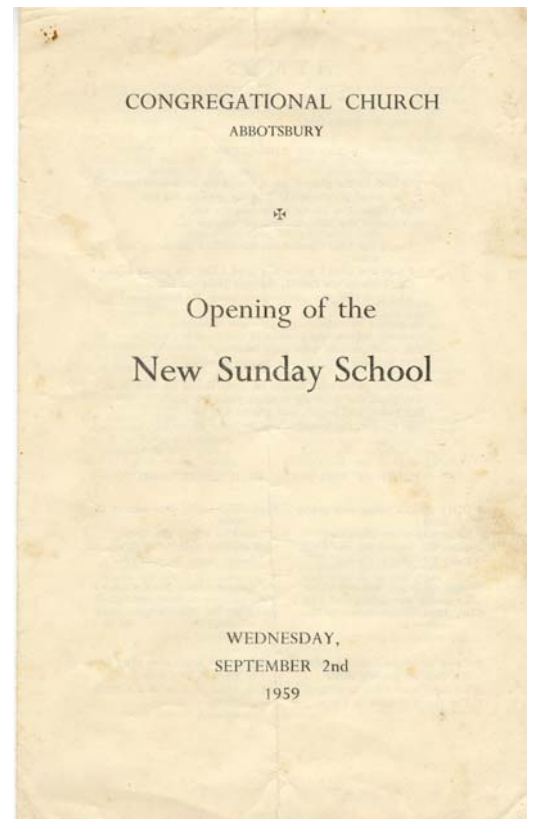


Old postcard of Abbotsbury view showing the meeting place, date unknown

- 1847 The first permanent minister for Abbotsbury is believed to be Mr. J.B. Bishop who was appointed in the autumn of 1847 His duties included supervision of the Sunday School, holding a bible class and preaching at Portesham. He was given a grant of £30 pa by the Home Missionary Society, a donation of £10 pa from Mr Roper of Bridport and the County Association also gave assistance. Mr Bishop describes the chapel as “awfully dark, the people ignorant and irreligious” During his ministry of two years however the congregation had grown in size such that it was necessary to enlarge the chapel and £1 a year was paid for additional leased land. The extension work was carried out by a Mr. Dobson of Weymouth.
- 1849 Mr. Bishop was succeeded by Mr. Samuel Knell until 1853 after which the ministry again reverted to itinerant preachers, mainly from Weymouth. What role the Methodist followers played during this whole period is not known but the evidence suggests they shared the use of the building and continued to use it after the Congregationalists moved to new premises in 1870.



Above: photograph of Sunday School taken circa 1955
 Right: Copy of new Sunday School programme (front page)



A woodwork class in progress in the old Methodist chapel, circa 1935

1870 Congregational Church – Back Street (now Marie Laywine’s Studio)

By the 1860's the 1799 chapel was becoming unsustainable - “ a rude structure, inconveniently situated and in a dilapidated condition” (The Story of the Congregational Churches of Dorset) and on the 5th October 1870 a new building was opened in Back Street, built to plans prepared by Mr R. C. Bennett. This also was built on land leased by Lord Ilchester at a rental of £1 a year with the restriction that it should not have a Sunday school. Rev. J Rogers from Bridport presided over the opening service in the afternoon. Tea was provided to some 200 people in a local field. An evening service was conducted by Mr R. Damon of Weymouth with assistance from Messrs Neave, Sherren, Rogers, Ashton and Lewis. The vicar, the Revd G. H. Penney, gave a handsome pulpit bible and supplied a table at the tea. The deacons (Capt White and Mr Wallbridge) contributed £95 and £43-10s and within a year all the liabilities (£432-6s-6d) were discharged.

The freehold to the property was obtained on 8th April 1925, largely due to the efforts of Mr E. A. Lowe

On Wednesday, September 2nd 1959 a new Sunday School was opened at the Congregational Church, despite a previous embargo imposed by the Ilchester Estate in 1870.

In 1972 the Congregationalist church became part of the United Reform Church (Congregationalist United Reform Church records NP Vol. 1). Church minutes exist from 1877 to 1977, as does a memo dated 1977 relating to the future of the Church which is yet to be reviewed. The church passed into private hands in ???



Congregational Church – above taken c.1900, right is postcard sent in 1906.



Above: Postcard showing IBRA meeting, 1911



Photograph taken in 2004

1925 Methodist Church – West Street

An article in the Chesil magazine written by Mrs Olive Ely (now Attley) dated February 1982 informs us that the site for the chapel was given in October 1922 by the Earl of Ilchester to Abbotsbury Primitive Methodist Church. Conditions that applied included that the land was to revert to the estate if it ceases to be used as the site for a chapel and no noise was permitted. Two old cottages stood on the site which were demolished. The building was constructed from wood and asbestos sheeting on a brick foundation and the materials were supplied by Messrs. John Harrison and Co. of Camberwell, London, for the sum of £348-10-0. The building was designed to seat between 130 and 140 people and included a back room. Demolition of the cottages and certain 'making good' of boundary walls, building the foundations, erection of the building, making of the pulpit and notice board, building the front wall, hanging the iron gates etc. were all carried out by an unknown contractor from Weymouth. The total cost of the whole project, including the provision of 100 chairs, is quoted at about £500. Fifty years after the event a cheque was received from the original supplier of the chairs because he felt he had overcharged for them – a very belated guilty conscience!

The chapel was opened on 11th November 1925 and registered for worship five days later. Until this time the Methodists had been using the old Congregational chapel behind Strangways Hall and this building now reverted to the use of the (then) school.

It is believed that there was not a permanent resident minister at the chapel but it was one of a number of churches supported by the Weymouth Methodist Circuit.

The final service was held in 1984 (Methodist records NM9-11)

The original foundation stones were initialled, presumably indicating donations given for the building of the chapel. After the building was demolished these stones were recycled and some may still be seen in the garden of number 4 West Street.



Laying the foundation stones
circa 1923



Remembrance Day service at the Methodist chapel, 1983.



Foundation stones found in the garden of No 4 West Street (where chapel stood) – donor's initials clear.

Questions still to be addressed:

1. Where was Humphrey Miller's house in 1672?
2. Why was there no Sunday School allowed in the new Congregational church and why was this ruling overturned (see photographic evidence of Sunday School)?
3. When did the Congregational church pass into private ownership?
4. What do the initials IBRA stand for (Congregational photo from 1911)?
5. When, after 1984, was the Methodist chapel in West Street demolished?
6. What were the names of the donors whose initials appear on the foundation stones of the Methodist chapel (RV, PV, FCD, MW, EPS, MPN, HRS, WJG, VRV, JC, AC, HC)?

References

Bridport Congregational Church book
Evangelical Magazine of 1800
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Methodist records NM9-11
Chesil magazine, February 1982

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Kelly's Directory (1920)
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